

## By Terry Steinwand

Compared to the last 20 years, 2003 was a pretty good year for fishing in North Dakota. While we'd always like to see it better, I'm pleased with last year's results.

Many, though not all of the state's smaller lakes and reservoirs, produced good early fishing. When you consider that not long ago we had just 150 fishable waters in the state instead of about 350 in 2003, you'd figure some of them would "turn on" and produce fish.

Though many lakes have good fish populations, there are always factors that diminish fishing success. For example, we knew a certain lake in south-central North Dakota had a population of quality-sized perch – fish more than eight inches long – going into winter 2002-03. The population was estimated at over a quarter million, but these fish didn't start biting until March 2003. Why? The reasons can range from too much forage, to something stressing the system and keeping fish from being cooperative. And, of course, sometimes the fish just aren't there.

The 2003 fishing season was also one for the books as four state records were broken. It's not unusual for a state record to fall every year or two, especially when water conditions are as good as they've been. But to have four fall in one year is unusual.

The first record broken was the common carp. While some people may scoff at the idea of having a fish like the "lowly" carp on the whopper list, it certainly made one youngster happy to be the holder of a state record. The fish came from the Sheyenne River and weighed 31 pounds, shattering the old mark by about 5 pounds. The second record to go down was the cutthroat trout. As with the last few cutthroat records, this one came from the Garrison Dam Tailrace and weighed in at 10 pounds, 1 ounce. This fish wasn't a great surprise since this record has been broken several times in the last few years since we started stocking cutthroats.

The third record was a pure muskie from New John's Lake. This monster weighed 46 pounds and, as with the carp, shattered the old record by a bunch. We've always felt the new record pure muskie would come from New John's, but it took a little longer than expected. The final record to fall in 2003 was for smallmouth bass. The 5-pound, 15-ounce fish was caught in autumn in Spiritwood Lake.

It takes a long time and the right conditions to grow fish this big – as well as a little luck to catch them. These are older fish that make up a small portion of the population in a given lake or river. As someone once said to me: "They have to be small before they can get big," and there are many more small fish than large fish. That's just the way it is.

Not every fishing outing in 2003, however, was a record breaker. Salmon fishing on Lake Sakakawea wasn't as good as we would have liked, but environmental factors contributed to that. The rainbow smelt population has declined some because of low water levels, likely contributing to smaller individual salmon, and fewer fish overall.

Farther downstream, Lake Oahe in North Dakota vanished in 2003, leaving only the Missouri River. Dry conditions, and some controversial water management decisions, contributed to lower reservoir water levels in the Missouri River System. Both fishing and access were affected. This is one of the most frustrating issues we face. When we have good water conditions, fish populations and fishing can be tremendous. We can even experience good fishing as water levels decline. But to have low water conditions over a period of years can certainly negatively influence fishing and fish management.

# Fisheries Overview

Photo Omitted

# 2004 FISHING FORECAST

Winter returned to North Dakota in 2003-04. In the northwestern part of the state, for instance, it arrived in late October and hung on.

Everybody talks about how snow and cold of a long winter affects deer and pheasants, and rightfully so. But it also affects our fisheries across the state. Even though fish live in a much more stable environment than deer or pheasants, they still have to breathe. While snow provides much needed runoff into lakes, it also prevents sunlight from penetrating through the ice where it provides the necessary energy for plants to produce oxygen. Some North Dakota waters had fish kills this winter, but our fingers are crossed that the numbers will be minimal and not as extensive as 1982 when more than 50 lakes were lost. We won't know the fallout of winter until fisheries personnel check waters sometime in spring.

Lower water levels across the state will certainly have an affect on North Dakota fisheries. Lake Sakakawea will likely be hit hardest in terms of boating access, and available coldwater habitat. North Dakota Game and Fish Department fisheries staff is coordinating with other agencies to make sure we have

the maximum number of access sites available this season. While these sites won't be as convenient as permanent ramps, we'll do what we can to open access as fast as possible.

Of greater concern is the loss of coldwater habitat and its influence on the recreational fishery. Rainbow smelt are a coldwater fish and the backbone of Lake Sakakawea's fishery. Without adequate smelt numbers, survival of game fish decreases, condition of predators declines, and the entire fishery is affected.

Game and Fish and other state agencies have been working on issues relating to low water levels in upstream Missouri River reservoirs for more than a decade, and don't appear to be making significant progress. We won't quit trying, however, to get the best for the Sakakawea fishery.

While the immediate future for Sakakawea isn't bright, we have to remember it can rebound quickly under the right conditions. Eleven years ago, for instance, significant summer rains helped fill a low Sakakawea.

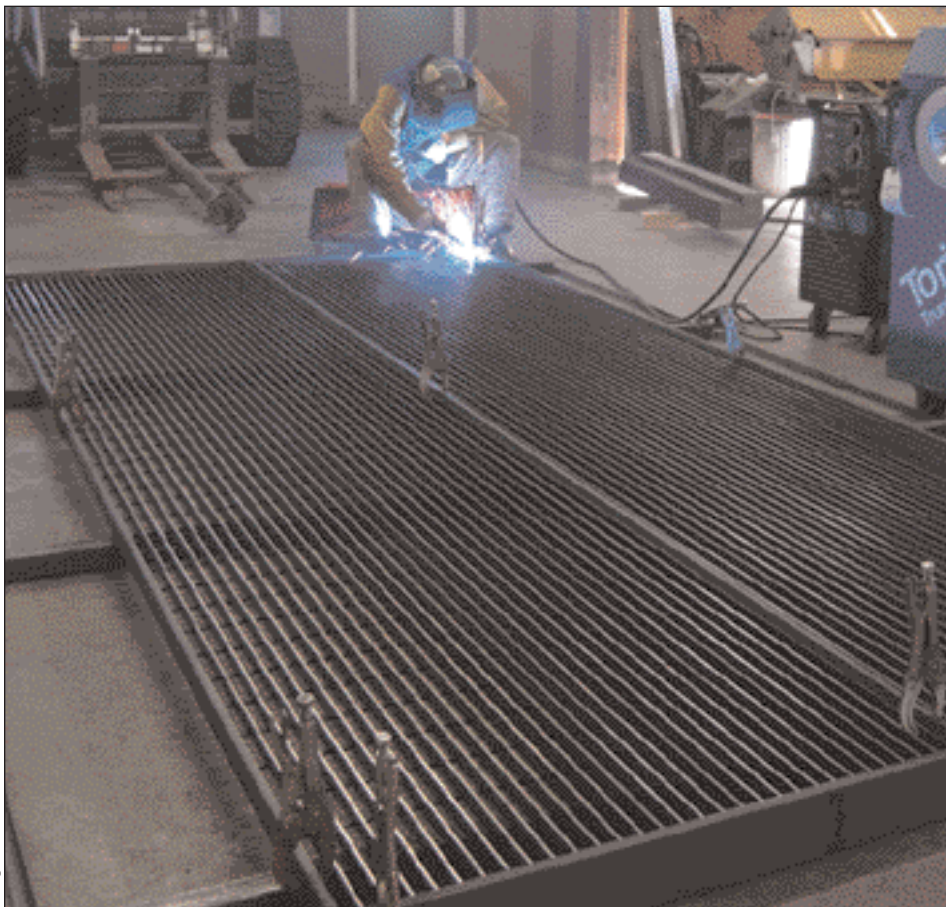
We can't forget about many other lakes across the state that provide great fishing opportunities. While water levels might be slightly down in many of these waters, they still harbor some good fish populations. Devils Lake still has great access and good fishing. Many other lakes and reservoirs offer the same opportunities.

We tend to concentrate on the present and hope for the best in the future. While hope should always be there, we can't sit back and wait for things to happen. Sometimes we have to make them happen. This is the case with the Department's Save Our Lakes program. It's only 2 years old, but already has made major strides. The purpose of the program is to recover aquatic habitats that have been lost, while protecting some important habitats required for long-term health of fisheries. Results likely won't be immediate as it takes time for a system to recover.

Overall, I'm optimistic about 2004. Sure, we have challenges that will take work, patience and a little luck to overcome, but still I'm convinced we can go into this spring looking forward to a better than average fishing season.

**TERRY STEINWAND** is the Game and Fish Department's fisheries chief.

Photo Omitted



*Work on boat ramps for North Dakota fisheries start indoors in winter long before waters thaw.*

## CHANGES TO 2004-2006 FISHING REGULATIONS

Some changes for the next two years include:

- Lightning Lake and Nygren Dam are closed to winter fishing. Rationale: An attempt to provide larger, quality trout in select lakes. Trout are typically susceptible to harvest in December and January.
- Trout possession limit reduced from six to three. Rationale: A change meant to reduce trout harvest and augment the trout population.
- Daily and possession limits on white bass established at 35 and 175. Rationale: Although a statewide regulation, this is primarily geared toward Devils Lake where the white bass population has shown a gradual decline, while angling pressure has increased.
- Daily and possession limits on burbot (ling) established at 10 and 20. Rationale: North Dakota's burbot population is relatively stable, but declining on a region-wide basis. The move is a proactive approach to maintaining the current population.
- On the Red and Bois de Sioux River, daily and possession limits will be three for northern pike, also for walleye, sauger and saug-eye. Rationale: Based on negotiations with the Minnesota DNR and a compromise to more stringent regulations the last four years. Creel surveys indicated the harvest in spring was insignificant and a more liberal regulation for the Red River, yet more restrictive than rest of the state, would provide the same recreational opportunity.
- Catch-and-release only for trout April 1 through June 30 each year on Lightning Lake, Nygren Dam, Moon Lake and McDowell Dam. Rationale: Another management option in an effort to produce larger, quality trout in select lakes. As with all other regulations, it will be evaluated as to whether it's accomplishing its goal.
- Dickinson Dike, Camel Hump Dam and Lightning Lake added as no live baitfish lakes. Rationale: Most of the lakes added because of recent or planned chemical renovations to remove undesirable species. It's been found that many of the undesirable introductions are the result of unintentional bait dumping.
- Possession of one over the limit of any protected fish species carries a \$100 noncriminal fine; two or more over the limit is a Class B misdemeanor. This excludes paddlefish and muskellunge, both of which are a Class B misdemeanor with any over-limit. Rationale: A more protective measure for those who attempt to take more fish than legally allowed while still allowing some flexibility.